

Lent Out / Play Hour

Sitting on the armchair. Shyly looking at Grace. The bank manager's only daughter thinking 'Why me?' My dad had offered one of us to go keep Grace company. To play with her. Being closer to her age of ten years maybe swung that choice.

It felt uncomfortable in that sparsely furnished front room. Though the armchair fabric was lush, soft and rich looking, it brought no ease to my mind.

How to play with this beautiful blonde strange girl sitting so still.

Staring at me. 'Can I sit here to play?' were my nervous thoughts. Being instructed not to go outside really tightened the choices in my head. Not able to skip, play hopscotch, or ball up against the wall, had me stumped.

"Hello Grace," I muttered as she nodded her head. Looking at the floor spying the Ludo game. I knew it would save us. Use up that allotted hour of play. Letting her win most of the time made her smile. Smiles were as much as I got outside of the Ludo moves chat.

Never again, was my vow, leaving her that day. Was not

even asked to do so. She stayed in my thoughts though. That lonely beautiful blonde girl.

Being invited by my big sister with her and her friend Dympna seemed less of a task. To play with the daughter of one of the 'ladies fashion shop' owners. Her only daughter was exciting. I didn't have to plan 'the playing' scenario. Just tag along.

It just so happened her home was across the road from the bank. This older girl of twelve years was an only child too. Brigid. On arrival, again the allotted time to play was one hour. The maid announced.

The four of us climbed the ladder to the upstairs loft of the outside. Across the side yard off the shop. A washing board and mangle stood proudly beside the downstairs door.

Full of 'nooks and cranies,' cushions, dolls even boxed games were strewn throughout the loft. The dolls cast aside in forgotten disarray. Mostly looking on, resting on the cushions, feeling happy to have come. The games of 'hide and seek' and 'snakes and ladders' too took that allotted time up so quickly.

Brigid was fun loving, smart and fast, as she took hold of that play hour. That hour seemed to have ended exactly on time as the chapel bell chimed. We knew she would have more of those times as she joined my sister Noreen with Dympna away from the loft. Mostly in secret.

Who planned that play time I never knew. Was it my father? Now it is known my mother had a hand in that plan. Maybe she was also behind the bank manager's Grace 'play hour.' Whispering those ideas to my da. Knowing she was good at listening and good at talking to people. Hearing their worries. Their cares.

Loneliness was a feeling we never understood. Our mam, our da, saw to that. The never ending visitors to our home. The customers to the shop. Traditions they unconsciously kept. The whiskey in the 'tae' too for the nervous or flustered person making them at ease. No television to distract them. Only music, all those songs and stories to fill any lonely day. The sharing of us children too. Playing with children who didn't know how. Making friends for ever. No more hour of play, just endless fun.